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Nathan Bedford Forrest headed north toward Kentucky while the Confederacy was fighting for its life before Atlanta. An example needed to be made. The former slave trader headed north toward Paducah.

JENNIE FYFE IN WAR AND PEACE

The Bentley Historical Library of the University of Michigan in Lansing houses a collection of letters written between Jennie Fyfe and her family during the latter years of the Civil War. Always candid in her observations; Jennie does not hesitate to share her fears and joys at the events that she experienced. At age 31 in the spring of 1864, Jennie Fyfe felt compelled to give of her time and service as a nurse to the continuing war effort on the behalf of the Union. She boarded the Illinois Central Railroad in Chicago on March 20 and set off toward Paducah, Kentucky. About 6:00 a.m. she arrived at the end of the line in Cairo, Illinois and immediately felt the consequences of war profiteers. The St. Charles Hotel charged her one dollar to light a fire in her room. "Deliver me from Cairo" she wrote to her sister. She left about 6:00 p.m. by boat for Paducah. The crew of the *General Anderson* proved to be courteous as its clerk saw her to the Continental Hotel at Main and Broadway where she stayed the night and had breakfast. She recalled that the staff of the hotel gave her attention, "but we paid for it." She walked to the federal Marine hospital, sensing

that among the locals, "secession prevails," but she felt no personal danger.⁵⁶

Jennie was surprised at the size of Paducah, estimating its population to be 10,000. The presence of gas lights also was noted and reported in a letter March 20, 1864 to her sisters. Kentucky was a slave state despite its decision to remain in the Union during the War of the Rebellion. When fighting started in 1861, Kentucky chose to remain neutral and threatened to fight either North or South if they violated Kentucky soil. The posture of neutrality lasted into early 1862 when General Leonidas Polk, acting upon his own initiative, invaded Kentucky and seized Hickman and Columbus along the Mississippi River for the Confederacy. General U.S. Grant, newly in command at Cairo, IL, seized Paducah early the next day and Kentucky then declared for the Union as a loyal slave-holding state. The Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 did not free one Kentucky slave. In fact, slavery remained legal in Kentucky after the end of the war. Kentucky slavery ended in December of 1865 when the Thirteenth Amendment became official. On July 8, 1863, the United States War Department authorized the enlistment of free Negroes into the armed forces. Kentuckians protested strongly and Lincoln lifted the application in Kentucky on October 25. By 1864, the situation changed. February 27, Lorenzo Thomas telegraphed Secretary of War Stanton from

⁵⁶ Dr. Achilles Anderson had offices at Third and Broadway but resided at the Marine Hospital and was the "surgeon and steward" at the time the institution was given over to the Union Army.

Paducah: "I arrived here this morning. In my letter of the 1st instant, I reported instructions respecting the First Artillery Regiment Colored Troops, to be raised at Paducah, Kentucky. Shall I proceed with its organization?" Authorization was given.⁵⁷ This action made Paducah a target for retaliation by the Confederates. If a Kentucky slave enlisted, he and his family were freed. The Eighth Heavy Artillery Regiment (Colored) served new Fort Anderson.⁵⁸

In 1864, Paducah was protected by the two wooden gunboats, the U.S.S. *Peosta* and the U.S.S. *Paw Paw* and a dirt redoubt, Fort Anderson, near the federal Marine hospital where Jennie worked. Fyfe soon heard that rebels had been reported near Mayfield, about twenty miles south. The authorities at the hospital told her that if the rebels did attack that the soldiers in the fort under Colonel Hicks were instructed to "fire the place to prevent the commissary stores from falling into the hands of the rebels." In fact, the prevailing sentiment was the rebels "do not care to hold the place. It is merely plunder they are after. This being the case & so many rebels here, many think the place will not be attacked after all." As a result, many in sympathy with the Confederates "use their influence against it [the attack] of course, for in that case their property must go with the rest." She went on to note the presence of "Pox." Death is a thing so common that it rules but "for a *little* while & all is merry again."

On March 25, Major General Nathan B. Forrest attacked Paducah with a few less than 3,000 mounted infantry and cavalry. The 650 man

⁵⁷ *Official Records*, Series III, IV, 138.

garrison under Colonel Stephen G. Hicks retired to the fort, supported by two gun boats. Among the troops was the Eighth Artillery, a recently recruited black regiment. Jennie wrote of her experiences immediately after the battle; however, that letter was lost. On April 6, Jennie wrote again. "You, of course, have read numerous accounts of the Paducah Raid. I see some much exaggerated; & others quite correct. Will tell you something of what we witnessed of it here. Think I told you in a previous letter, that rumors of an attack were rife among us, yet little heeded. Thursday, March 24th we were surprised by the ringing of the alarm bell, calling the Union League together. The Enemy were said to be coming upon us yet no one seemed alarmed & things moved on quietly as usual. Soon after dinner it again sounded & all went immediately to the Hall. A little excitement prevailed for awhile but died away as evening approached. We ladies walked out to the Fort to see something of the stir. The guns were all mounted there, & the gun Boats in readiness for an attack, but after all, none among us seemed to think but we were all safe."

Jennie continued, "Things passed on as usual till after dinner [noon on the 25th]. Miss Cox had lain down, the rest of us were scattered here & there, when all suddenly came the news. The Rebels were coming. "The hospital staff looked out and saw the Confederates approaching. Fyfe went to check on the wards, trying to remain "apparently calm & lively." She looked out a window and saw a rebel with a pistol in hand, ready to fire. "I drew away from the window, when orders came for the ladies to go below. I went. Had no sooner got there, than

the boom of cannon was heard & the Rebel officers were entering our Hospital & demanding surrender. [The able bodied men had gone to the Fort previously.] "We were powerless, & of course could do nothing but surrender, and allow them to plunder as they pleased. They first entered the office – took nearly all our medicines." Jennie and the other nurses were angered at the loss of their supplies. "It made our blood boil a little to see them perform & hear them command our men—They were exceeding polite to us ladies, during all of their stay here, but became rough & profane, to the men generally. " Next, the raiders searched the closets where the soldiers' knapsacks were kept. Jennie estimated that about fifty men were involved in the raid of the hospital. "They presented a ludicrous appearance dressed in all sorts of colored clothing, their horses laden with cloths of all kinds, shawls, silks, etc. etc. Old Forrest himself stood in the back yard, close to the house & and gave his orders."

Jennie continued in her letter to revel in how she and the other Union personnel managed to deceive, obstruct, and confuse the pillagers. Two shells came through the windows. "They alarmed the patients much, who crouched in corners, under beds, etc., etc. One of the Scamps came into Ward C – my ward – and with aimed pistol demanded the money of each patient & Nurse – the patients most fortunately had none." [Most of the men had given their money & watches to Jennie and the other ladies on seeing the rebels coming.]

During the evening, Jennie and her companions had occasion to hear "the scandalous treatment" of the ladies of building No. 1, who were

all taken prisoners, but all escaped. "One of them came to us. All excitement & so wearied all night long she moaned & sighed, 'O, could I forget it.' She would say, but it is all before me worse than reality. Another of them we saw, who said, she saw no Rebels, nothing but stump which she got behind for protection from the fire & shell. When the Flag of Truce was sent in & the firing for a few moments ceased, she made her escape to the river which she crossed, & remained there till Monday."

The "Battle" of Paducah is more appropriately described as a raid. Forrest advanced from Mayfield, drove in federal pickets, and, under a flag of truce, demanded that Stephen Hicks surrender Fort Anderson on the river. Among the Confederate troops were the Third Kentucky with many from Paducah. The federal forces under Colonel Hicks were in the new redoubt near the Federal Hospital with support from the two gun boats. The surrender demand was rejected. While one part of Forrest's command liberated or destroyed Union supplies along Broadway, others took cover in buildings facing the fort and kept the garrison occupied. Confederate long rifles atop buildings fronting on the river kept Union gunboat portholes closed, limiting the effectiveness of that artillery. An impromptu assault on Fort Anderson failed, with heavy losses. During this attack, Col. A. P. Thompson who had left Paducah in 1861 to join the Third Regiment of the Confederates [under Paducahan, Lloyd Tilghman] at Guthrie in Tennessee was killed. One eyewitness reported the cannon shot knocked Thomson from his horse, killing both. As he remembered, Thompson's spine was burst from the

body and lay writhing like a coiled snake. Forrest gathered his spoils and left town that evening. The next morning, Hicks ordered houses near the fort to be burned to prevent their use again in attacks on the fort. Many citizens resented this deeply as most of the property was owned by those favorable to secession.⁵⁹

On March 31, Jennie again wrote to her sister, elaborating on the Good Friday raid. On the following Sunday, "we saw twenty or thirty horsemen entering with a flag of truce. All was excitement again, as we supposed they came to demand surrender but we were most happily mistaken, as they only wished the body of one of their men." [Thompson?] The next day continued to bring fear. "Rumors were rife all day Monday, however, and all night we expected the enemy were approaching for an attack in the morning. Tuesday, rumor came that Morgan [Kentucky General John Hunt Morgan] had joined with Forest [sic] & that they were to

⁵⁹ Louis Kolb, Sr. recalled the Battle of Paducah in an article in the *News-Democrat* on March 2, 1947, 63 years after the event. The advanced rebel contingent arrived at the Union outpost at Eden's Hill about 2:20 Saturday afternoon. By 3:00 p.m., Forrest's main body reached what is now Fifteenth and Broadway, where they dismounted to wait for dark. Kolb and his young wife got to "the river bank about 5 o'clock, on the afternoon of the battle." Kolb managed to gain a place for his family in a small boat. "I clung fast to the bottom of the boat while the firing was going on, near a woman with a bad case of smallpox, having less fear of contracting the disease than the shots from in and around the fort." The Kolbs crossed to Brookport, IL where they remained until the fighting ended on Sunday. Forrest may have left sooner than intended due to the presence of smallpox.

make an united attack." Nothing occurred. Still Jennie fretted. "We looked for no mercy from the guerrillas & our own guns might be directed this way to reach the enemy." An orderly from the hospital went to Colonel Hicks to get assurance that friendly fire would not be forthcoming if they remained in the hospital. He refused. "How comforting to us, & how noble of him." If fighting resumed, able bodied men were to go immediately to the fort. The ladies remained. "A few things were gotten together in case we left, ourselves dressed ready for any emergence & then we laid down to rest—yes, & sleep, strange as it may seem—we have had such continued excitement, and alarm, that we are fast learning to do as the soldiers do, rest till the enemy comes—But they did not come."

Jennie did inform her sisters of the conduct of the black soldiers during the attack. "Our colored troops did nobly. They fought with perfect desperation & nearly all the killed and wounded was among them. Went over to see the wounded—found them quite as intelligent as most of the Kentuckians. By the way, my ideas of Kentucky and Kentuckians have been taken down a peg since I came to this place. Low ignorant in the extreme, we find so many of them, that cannot neither read or write."

After the smoke cleared, many in Paducah boasted that Forrest had been duped by the wiles of Paducahans. They crowed about the many fine horses they hid successfully from the southern forces. Forrest allowed General Abe Buford and his fellow Kentuckians in Forrest's command to return to Paducah to get the horses, which they did on April

14. Then, the Kentuckians went on furlough while Forrest and his troops from Tennessee and Mississippi attacked Fort Pillow which also had black recruits among the Federals. A massacre resulted after the surrender. Paducah was fortunate. Alarms continued and irregulars operated openly throughout western Kentucky, but Jennie was secure.

The return of General Eleazor A. Paine to Paducah on July 19, 1864 boded ill for those favoring the Confederacy. He had been among those arriving with U.S. Grant in 1862 to keep western Kentucky from falling into Confederate hands and thus was known to the citizens and disliked by many for his ardent support of those loyal to the Union. Paine declared that only loyal people would be allowed to trade. All trade was subject to military oversight. Bank drafts also had to bear military approval. A group of known Southern sympathizers were expelled to Canada on August 10, 1864. Mayor John Sauner was ordered to appear before Paine who gave him "a good cussing" for about an hour which ended with a threat that Paine would shoot him if needed. Sauner left town. This period is remembered in Paducah as the Reign of Terror. Jennie approved of Paine's efforts. General Solomon Meredith replaced Paine September 8. In her letter of September 27, 1864, Jennie commented that "if Payne [sic] did which many dispute, he [Meredith] certainly is undoing it with all possible speed - The city is now full of Rebels, everybody being allowed to come in, trade, & carry it; their purchases to the enemy as they see fit. It's certainly fearful to see things going as they are-

Can't understand, & sometimes get pretty nearly discouraged. – the general feeling here, however, is that the war is nearly over – May it be so – but may it not be so by making an inglorious peace."⁶⁰

On June 15, 1866, Jennie wrote Nell on new stationary—that of the United States Sanitary Commission. A new leaf in the book of life for Jennie had opened." I think you will say, when I tell you, I am in school, and the weather a large portion of the time, scalding hot." She told her sister that she had left the hospital over two weeks ago and now "I have a delightful teaching place where I feel so much at home." The pupils number over forty ranging in age from six to forty. "I am entered into the missionary work of teaching contrabands, and my pupils are all shades of complexion, from white to coal black." Her new employer was the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands led by Army chaplain Thomas K. Noble. Although Kentucky was a loyal state, it was a slave-owning state. Freedmen had no protection under Kentucky law at the time. Federal intrusion into the care of freed blacks was deeply resented by many in Kentucky and vendetta, violence, and lawlessness swept the

⁶⁰ *Official Records*, Series I, XXXIX, Part 3, 355. Later, Paine faced court martial in 1866 but not convicted. In a letter of February 15, 1866, Jennie said that Paine "has many friends here among the Union people, but the Rebels go in for Meredith. Several Generals are here to officiate in the trial of Gen. Payne [sic]. Do not know the charges against him, but have heard they were many & of a very grim character. He has certainly done much for Paducah & the country around, & we are this day even reaping the benefits, notwithstanding all Gen. Meredith has undone."

state for a decade. But Jennie was ecstatic. She had found her vocation.

From the Fyfe Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

John E. L. Robertson is a longtime member of the Jackson Purchase Historical Society and a frequent contributor to the Journal. Robertson wrote *A Study in Empathy* by John E. L. Robertson with research assistance by Vonnie Shelton and presented a program on Jennie Fyfe for the Society which was well received. Shelton is also a longtime member of the JPHS.